

Laser Beak Man (Brisbane Festival)

Limelight review by Jo Litson, 23 September 2017

Anyone who knows the exuberant, colourful drawings of Queensland artist Tim Sharp, with their joyous, quirky take on life, will wonder a little at the rather restrained start to *Laser Beak Man*, the brand new show inspired by his artwork including the superhero he first drew when he was 11. But wait and see – there is method in the madness.

The show begins with a hole in a large black wall in which we watch puppeteers with smallish puppets set up the story of Laser Beak Man. We meet Beaky at kindergarten where he becomes friends with Peter Bartman and Emily, and then onto university where someone invents environmentally friendly magna crystals that can power the whole world for free.

When a crystal malfunction threatens to blow everyone to smithereens, Beaky tries to intervene and finds himself turned into a gentle superhero who can fly and fire lasers that can turn bad things into good, leaving rainbows behind him wherever he goes.

With his new powers, the silent Beaky becomes known as Laser Beak Man. And suddenly in a coup de théâtre, the stage is transformed by fantastically clever projections of drawings by Sharp, which bring his wonderful world to vivid, Technicolor-bright, three-dimensional animated life. It's a priceless moment. From there, the stunning visuals just keep coming. Kudos to Sharp himself, Production Designer Jonathon Oxlade and Projection Designer Justin Harrison.

As is well documented, Sharp, now 29, is on the autism spectrum. Diagnosed at age three, his mother Judy was told his condition was so severe that he would never be able to speak, empathise with her, or tell her that he loved her, not something that she wanted to accept. One day, when he was four, Judy drew some stick figures one day to explain to her son what they were going to do that day. He was unusually engaged. When she stopped, he pushed her arm back to get her to draw again.

Drawing opened Sharp's life in a way that the specialist had deemed impossible. Among his many achievements, he and Judy have given a TED-X talk at the Sydney Opera House, and his drawings of Laser Beak Man have been turned into an animated television series.

Four years ago, David Morton and Nicholas Paine of Queensland's Dead Puppet Society, met Sharp at the Brisbane Powerhouse where a play of theirs was being staged at the same time as an exhibition of Sharp's drawings. Already fans, they suggested collaborating on a stage show.

Written by Morton, Paine and Sharp, and directed by Morton, *Laser Beak Man* has been in development since then, both at Brisbane's La Boite Theatre Company and at the New Victory Theatre in New York, a venue dedicated to shows for children and families.

Now *Laser Beak Man* is having its world premiere season, co-produced by Dead Puppet Theatre, La Boite and Brisbane Festival in association with PowerArts.

Visually, the show is an absolute blast. Once the colourful animations kick in, the show tells the cartoon story of how Peter Bartman becomes jealous of Laser Beak Man and steals the crystals, reluctantly assisted by Emily – now Evil Emily – transforming himself into a powerful, villainous robot. Laser Beak Man (now robbed of his powers) must learn to work with others, including a much-maligned Black Sheep, to get the crystals back from Bartman’s clutches.

Along the way we encounter a giant, marauding tomato, Leigh Sales, and many of Sharp’s characters including Amazing Grace and Barbie. The script is packed with Sharp’s trademark visual puns, along with plenty of jokes (a wall to keep people out of Power City, “deplorables”, fake news etc.) for the adults.

Laser Beak Man is performed by seven actors (Lauren Jackson, Jeremy Neideck and Helen Stephens from Brisbane, and Nathaniel P. Claridad, Jon Riddleberger, Betsy Rosen, Maren Searle from the US), who operate 35 different puppets between them. There are also two inflatable orbs, which fly drone-like over the heads of the audience.

Integral to the production is the music composed by Sam Cromack of indie Brisbane band Ball Park Music, who sings live as part of a four-piece band comprising Daniel Hanson, Dean Hanson and Luke Moseley. The music, which underscores the show, and features catchy, melodic songs, is a perfect fit with the story-telling.

Recommended for ages 8+, *Laser Beak Man* is huge fun but also has important things to say about inclusion, tolerance, friendship, people power and the beautiful things in life. Running 90 minutes without interval, it feels a bit overlong for the slight story but no matter, it’s a sensational achievement technically and a complete delight.